PHILIP STEELE

of the ROYAL NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE

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Author of The Danger Trail, The Honor of the Big Snows, etc.

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SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.—Philip Steele, son of a Chicago millionaire, lover of adventure and outdoor life, enlists at Regina in the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police. In his cabin station far up in the north he gets orders to go to the Hudson Bay Company post at Lac Bain, to join Bucky Nome, a fellow police officer.

CHAPTER II.—On Steele's arrival at Lac Bain the company's factor there, Breed, orders him to go on to Fort Churchill, on Hudson's Bay, to meet and assist Col. Becker, a high official in the company's service, who is on his way to visit the Lac Bain post on a tour of investigation. He finds the colonel, and with him unexpectedly, Isobel Becker. The fondness between them convinces Steele they are husband and wife.

CHAPTER III.—Arriving at Lac Bain, Steele finds Bucky Nome there. Nome, although in reality a desperado, has a captivating way with women. He makes love to Mrs. Becker after supper at Breed's, much to the indignation of Steele, who knows him well. When Steele and Nome return to their cabin at the post Steele angers Nome by charging him with murder, and with having designs on Mrs. Becker. Steele orders Nome to quit the service and the country, to become what he knows he will be, an outlaw. Nome leaves, with threats of ultimate vengeance. Then, later, Steele shoulders his pack and he, too, quits Lac Bain.

CHAPTER IV.—Steele visits the cabin of Jacque Pierrot, a half breed, with the idea of getting him as a companion on his patrol instead of Nome. There he is shown a silken scarf given by Mrs. Becker at Churchill to Jacque's sick wife, and the well-known odor of hyacinth clinging to it revives all his affection for Mrs. Becker.

CHAPTER V.—Inspector MacGregor summons Steele to Prince Albert and sends him on a dangerous mission to Wekusko to bring back a man named Thorpe, who had attempted to murder Chief Constructor Hodges.

CHAPTER VI.—Steele is kidnapped at Wekusko, through the decoy of a beautiful woman, bucked and gagged and nailed up tight in a box, which is carried to the woman's cabin. This woman is the wife of Thorpe.

CHAPTER VII.—While imprisoned in the box in the Thorpe home, Hodges visits the place and makes fruitless overtures to Mrs. Thorpe, which Steele overhears. Mrs. Thorpe bitterly berates Hodges for ruining her husband and pursuing her, and in her hate she kills him when he assaults her. Mrs. Thorpe then releases Steele, who now knows the entire story of the wicked conspiracy against Thorpe. He in turn releases Thorpe from prison and sends him and his wife to Chicago, giving them a check for $1,000 with which to begin life over again.

CHAPTER VIII.—Back in MacGregor's office again, Steele gets a letter by which he learns for the first time that Isobel Becker is the daughter and not the young wife of Col. Becker.

CHAPTER IX.—Philip is sent on the trail far up north to find DeBar, another great outlaw. Other officers sent previously to get DeBar never returned.

CHAPTER X.—On the hunt of DeBar, Steele varies from his route to go to Lac Bain in the hope of finding Miss Becker there. He learns they had left that morning. He follows their trail for several days, but fails to catch up. Then he returns to the chase of DeBar and the latter saves Steele's life when he meets with an accident.

CHAPTER XI.—DeBar and Steele find there is a good deal in the character of each that the other likes. The outlaw is not so bad as painted.

"You're cold," he said.

"I'm freezing to death," said Philip.

"And I'm—starving."

DeBar rose to his feet. Philip drew himself together, as if expecting an attack, but in place of it DeBar held out a warmly mittened hand.

"You've got to get those clothes off—quick—or you'll die," he said. "Here!"

Mechanically Philip reached up his hand, and DeBar took him to his sledge behind the fire and wrapped about him a thick blanket. Then he drew out a sheath knife and ripped the frozen legs of his trousers up and the sleeves of his coat down, cut the string of his shoepacks and slit his heavy German socks, and after that he rubbed his feet and legs and arms until Philip began to feel a sting like the prickly bite of nettles.

"Ten minutes more and you'd been gone," said DeBar.

He wrapped a second blanket around Philip, and dragged the sledge on which he was lying still nearer to the fire. Then he threw on a fresh armful of dry sticks and from a pocket of his coat drew forth something small and red and frozen, which was the carcass of a bird about the size of a robin. DeBar held it up between his forefinger and thumb, and looking at Philip the flash of a smile passed for an instant over his frizzled face.

"Dinner," he said, and Philip could not fail to catch the low chuckling note of humor in his voice. "It's a Whiskey Jack, man, an he's the first and last living thing I've seen in the way of fowl between here and Fond du Lac. He weighs four ounces if he weighs an ounce, and we'll feast on him shortly. I haven't had a full mouth of grub since day before yesterday morning, but you're welcome to a half of him, if you're hungry enough."

"Where'd your chuck go?" asked Philip.

He was conscious of a new warmth and comfort in his veins, but it was not this that sent a heat into his face at the outlaw's offer. DeBar had saved his life, and now, when DeBar might have killed him, he was offering him food. The man was spitting the bird on the sharpened end of a stick, and when he had done this he pointed to the big Mackenzie hound tied to the broken stub of a dead sapling.

"I brought enough bannock to carry me to Chippewayan, but he got into it the first night, and what he left was crumbs. You lost yours in the lake, eh?"

"Dogs and everything," said Philip. "Even matches."

"Those ice-traps are bad," said DeBar companionably, slowly turning the bird. "You always want to test lakes in this country. Most of 'em come from bog springs, and after they freeze, the water drops. Guess you'd had me pretty soon if it hadn't been for the lake, wouldn't you?"

He grinned, and to his own astonishment Philip grinnedd.

"I was tight after you, Bill."

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed the outlaw. "That sounds good! I've gone by another name, of course, and that's the first time I've heard my own since—"

He stopped suddenly, and the laugh left his voice and face.

"It sounds—homelike," he added more gently. "What's yours, pardner."

"Steele—Philip Steele, of the R. N. W. M. P.," said Philip.

"Used to know a Steele once," went on DeBar. "That was back—where it happened. He was one of my friends."

For a moment he turned his eyes on Philip. They were deep gray eyes, set well apart in a face that among a hundred others Philip would have picked out for its frankness and courage. He knew that the man before him was not much more than his own age, yet he appeared ten years older.

He sat up on his sledge as DeBar left his bird to thrust sticks into the snow, on the ends of which he hung Philip's frozen garments close to the fire. From the man Philip's eyes traveled to the dog. The hound yawned in the heat and he saw that one of his fangs was gone.

"If you're starving, why don't you kill the dog?" he asked.

DeBar turned quickly, his white teeth gleaming through his beard.

"Because he's the best friend I've got on earth, or next to the best," he said warmly. "He's stuck to me through thick and thin for ten years. He starved with me, and fought with me, and half died with me, and he's going to live with me as long as I live. Would you eat the flesh of your brother, Steele? He's my brother—the last that your glorious law has left to me. Would you kill him if you were me?"

Something stuck hard and fast in Philip's throat, and he made no reply. DeBar came toward him with the hot bird on the end of his stick. With his knife the outlaw cut the bird into two equal parts, and one of these parts he cut into quarters. One of the smaller pieces he tossed to the hound, who devoured it at a gulp. The half he stuck on the end of his knife and offered to his companion.

"No," said Philip. "I can't."

The eyes of the two men met, and DeBar, on his knees, slowly settled back, still gazing at the other. In the eyes of one there was understanding, in those of the other stern determination.

"See here," said DeBar, after a moment, "don't be a fool, Steele. Let's forget, for a little while. God knows what's going to happen to both of us tomorrow or next day, and it'll be easier to die with company than alone, won't it? Let's forget that you're the Law and I'm the Man, and that I've killed one or two. We're both in the same boat, and we might as well be a little bit friendly for a few hours, and shake hands, and be at peace when the last minute comes. If we get out of this, and find grub, we'll fight fair and square, and the best man wins. Be square with me, old man, and I'll be square with you, s'elp me God!"

He reached out a hand, gnarled, knotted, covered with callouses and scars, and with a strange sound in his throat Philip caught it tightly in his own.

"I'll be square, Bill!" he cried. "I swear that I'll be square—on those conditions. If we find grub and live, we'll fight it out—alone—and the best man wins. But I've had food today, and you're starving. Eat that and I'll still be in better condition than you. Eat it, and we'll smoke. Praise God I've got my pipe and tobacco!"

They settled back close in the lee of the drift, and the wind swirled white clouds of snow-mist over their heads, while DeBar ate his bird and Philip smoked. The food that went down DeBar's throat was only a morsel, but it put new life into him, and he gathered fresh armfuls of sticks and sapling boughs until the fire burned Philip's face and his drying clothes sent up clouds of steam. Once, a hundred yards out in the plain, Philip heard the outlaw burst into a snatch of wild forest song as he pulled down a dead stub.

"Seems good to have comp'ny," he said, when he came back with his load. "My God, do you know I've never felt quite like this—so easy and happy like, since years and years? I wonder if it is because I know the end is near?"

"There's still hope," replied Philip.

"Hope!" cried DeBar. "It's more than hope, man. It's a certainty for me—the end, I mean. Don't you see, Phil—" He came and sat down close to the other on the sledge, and spoke as if he had known him for years. "It's got to be the end for me, and I guess that's what makes me cheerful like. I'm going to tell you about it, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind; I want to hear," said Philip, and he edged a little nearer, until they sat shoulder to shoulder.

"It's got to be the end," repeated DeBar, in a low voice. "If we get out of this, and fight, and you win, it'll be because I'm dead, Phil. D'ye understand? I'll be dead when the fight ends, if you win. That'll be one end."

"But if you win, Bill."

A flash of joy shot into DeBar's eyes.

"Then that'll be the other end," he said more softly still. He pointed to the big Mackenzie hound. "I said he was next to my best friend on earth, Phil. The other—is a girl—who lived back there—when it happened, years and years ago. She's thirty now, and she's stuck to me, and prayed for me, and believed in me for—a'most since we were kids together, an' she's written to me—'Frank Symmonds'— once a month for ten years. God bless her heart! That is what's kept me alive, and in every letter she's begged me to let her come to me, wherever I was. But—I guess the devil didn't get quite all of me, for I couldn't, 'n' wouldn't. But I've give in now, and we've fixed it up between us. By this time she's on her way to my brothers in South America, and if I win—when we fight—I'm going where she is. And that's the other end, Phil, so you see why I'm happy. There's sure to be an end of it for me—soon."

He bowed his wild, unshorn head in his mittened hands, and for a time there was silence between them.

Philip broke it, almost in a whisper.

"Why don't you kill me—here—now—while I'm sitting helpless beside you, and you've a knife in your belt?"

DeBar lifted his head slowly and looked with astonishment into his companion's face.

"I'm not a murderer!" he said.

"But you've killed other men," persisted Philip.

"Three, besides those we hung," replied DeBar calmly. "One at Moose Factory, when I tried to help John, and the other two up here. They were like you—hunting me down, and I killed 'em in fair fight. Was that murder? Should I stand by and be shot like an animal just because it's the law that's doing it? Would you?"

He rose without waiting for an answer and felt of the clothes beside the fire.

"Dry enough," he said. "Put 'em on and we'll be hiking."

Philip dressed, and looked at his compass.

"Still north?" he asked. "Chippewayan is south and west."

"North," said DeBar. "I know of a breed who lives on Red Porcupine Creek, which runs into the Slave. If we can find him we'll get grub, and if we don't—"

He laughed openly into the other's face.

"We won't fight," said Philip, understanding him.

"No, we won't fight, but we'll wrap up in the same blankets, and die, with Woonga, there, keeping our backs warm until the last. Eh, Woonga, will you do that?"

He turned cheerily to the dog, and Woonga rose slowly and with unmistakable stiffness of limb, and was fastened in the sledge traces.

They went on through the desolate gloom of afternoon, which in late winter is, abve the sixtieth, all but night. Ahead of them there seemed to rise billow upon billow of snow-mountains. It was one chaos of white mingling with another chaos of white. They went on, hour after hour, until day gloom thickened into night, and night drifted upward to give place to gray dawn, plodding steadily north, resting now and then, fighting each mile of the way to the Red Porcupine against the stinging lashes of the Arctic wind.

And it was DeBar who finally lifted his mittened hands to the leaden chaos of sky when they came to the frozen streak that was the Red Porcupine, and said, in a voice through which there ran a strange thrill of something deep and mighty.

"God in Heaven be praised, this is the end!"

Five hundred yards down the stream DeBar stopped in his tracks, stared for a moment into the breaking gloom of the shore, and turned to Philip. He spoke in a voice low and trembling, as if overcome for the moment by some strong emotion.

"See—see there!" he whispered. "I've hit it, Philip Steele, and what does it mean? I've come over seventy miles of barren, through night an' storm, an' I've hit Pierre Thoreau's cabin as fair as a shot! Oh man, man, I couldn't do it once in ten thousand times!"

He gripped Philip's arm, and his voice rose in excited triumph.

"I tell'ee, it means that—that God—'r something—must be with me!"

"With us," said Philip, staring hard.

"With me," replied DeBar so fiercely that the other started involuntarily.

"It's a miracle, an omen, and it means that I'm going to win!"

His fingers gripped deeper, and he said more gently, "Phil, I've grown to like you, and if you believe in God as we believe in Him up here—if you believe He tells things in the stars, the winds and things like this, if you're afraid of death—take some grub and go back! I mean it, Phil, for if you stay, an' fight, there is going to be but one end. I will kill you!"

"But the blow lacked force."

CHAPTER XII.

The Fight—and a Strange Visitor.

AT DeBar's words the blood leaped swiftly through Philip's veins, and he laughed as he flung the outlaw's hand from his arm.

"I'm not afraid of death," he cried angrily. "Don't take me for a child, William DeBar. How long since you found this God of yours?"

He spoke the words half tauntingly, and as soon regretted them, for in a voice that betrayed no anger at the slur DeBar said: "Ever since my mother taught me the first prayer, Phil. I've killed three men and I've helped to hang three others, and still I believe in a God, and I've half a notion He believes a little bit in me, in spite of the laws made down in Ottawa."

The cabin loomed up amid a shelter of spruce like a black shadow and when they climbed up the bank to it they found the snow drifted high under the window and against the door.

"He's gone—Pierre, I mean," said DeBar over his shoulder as he kicked the snow away. "He hasn't come back from New Year's at Fort Smith."

The door had no lock or bolt, and they entered. It was yet too dark for them to see distinctly, and DeBar struck a match. On the table was a tin oil lamp, which he lighted. It revealed a neatly kept interior about a dozen feet square, with two bunks, several chairs, a table, and a sheet iron stove behind which was piled a supply of wood. DeBar pointed to a shelf on which were a number of tin boxes, their covers weighted down by chunks of wood.

"Grub!" he said.

And Philip, pointing to the wood, added, "Fire—fire and grub."

There was something in his voice which the other could not fail to understand, and there was an uncomfortable silence as Philip put fuel into the stove and DeBar searched among the food cans.

"Here's bannock and cooked meat—frozen," he said, "and beans."

He placed tins of each on the stove and then sat down beside the roaring fire, which was already beginning to diffuse a heat. He held out his twisted and knotted hands, blue and shaking with cold, and looked up at Philip, who stood opposite him.

He spoke no words, and yet there was something in his eyes which made the latter cry out softly, and with a feeling which he tried to hide:

"DeBar, I wish to God it was over!"

"So do I," said DeBar.

He rubbed his hands and twisted them until the knuckles cracked.

"I'm not afraid and I know that you're not, Phil," he went on, with eyes on the top of the stove, "but I wish it was over, just the same. Somehow I'd a'most rather stay up here another year or two than—kill you."

"Kill me!" exclaimed Philip, the old fire leaping back into his veins.

DeBar's quiet voice, his extraordinary self-confidence, sent a flush of anger into Philip's face.

"You're talking to me again as if I were a child, DeBar. My instructions were to bring you back, dead or alive—and I'm going to!"

"We won't quarrel about it, Phil," replied the outlaw as quietly as before. "Only I wish it wasn't you I'm going to fight. I'd rather kill half-a-dozen like the others than you."

"I see," said Philip, with a perceptible sneer in his voice. "You're trying to work upon my sympathy so that I will follow your suggestion—and go back. Eh?"

"You'd be a coward if you did that," retorted DeBar quickly. "How are we going to settle it, Phil?"

Philip drew his frozen revolver from its holster and held it over the stove.

"If I wasn't a crack shot, and couldn't center a two-inch bull's-eye three times out of four at thirty paces, I'd say pistols."

"I can't do that," said DeBar unhesitatingly, "but I have hit a wolf twice out of five shots. It'll be a quick, easy way, and we'll settle it with our revolvers. Going to shoot to kill?"

"No, if I can help it. In the excitement a shot may kill, but I want to take you back alive, so I'll wing you once or twice first."

"I always shoot to kill," replied DeBar, without lifting his head. "Any word you'd like to have sent home, Phil?"

In the other's silence DeBar looked up.

"I mean it," he said, in a low earnest voice. "Even from your point of view it might happen, Phil, and you've got friends somewhere. If anything should happen to me you'll find a letter in my pocket. I want you to write to—to her—an' tell her I died in—an accident. Will you?"

"Yes," replied Philip. "As for me, you'll find addresses in my pocket, too. Let's shake!"

Over the stove they gripped hands.

"My eyes hurt," said DeBar. "It's the snow and wind, I guess. Do you mind a little sleep—after we eat? I haven't slept a wink in three days and nights."

"Sleep until you're ready," urged Philip. "I don't want to fight bad eyes."

They ate, mostly in silence, and when the meal was done Philip carefully cleaned his revolver and oiled it with bear grease, which he found in a bottle on the shelf.

DeBar watched him as he wiped his weapon and saw that Philip lubricated each of the five cartridges which he put in the chamber.

Afterward they smoked.

Then DeBar stretched himself out in one of the two bunks, and his heavy breathing soon gave evidence that he was sleeping.

For a time Philip sat beside the stove, his eyes upon the inanimate form of the outlaw. Drowsiness overcame him then, and he rolled into the other bunk. He was awakened several hours later by DeBar, who was filling the stove with wood.

"How's the eyes?" he asked, sitting up.

"Good," said the other. "Glad you're awake. The light will be bad inside of an hour."

He was rubbing and warming his hands, and Philip came to the opposite side of the stove and rubbed and warmed his hands. For some reason he found it difficult to look at DeBar, and he knew that DeBar was not looking at him.

It was the outlaw who broke the suspense.

"I've been outside," he said in a low voice. "There's an open in front of the cabin, just a hundred paces across. It wouldn't be a bad idea for us to stand at opposite sides of the open and at a given signal approach, firing as we want to."

"Couldn't be better," exclaimed Philip briskly, turning to pull his revolver from its holster.

DeBar watched him with tensely anxious eyes as he broke the breech, looked at the shining circle of cartridges, and closed it again.

Without a word he went to the door, opened it, and with his pistol arm trailing at his side, strode off to the right. For a moment Philip stood off looking after him, a queer lump in his throat. He would have liked to shake hands, and yet at the same time he was glad that DeBar had gone in this way. He turned to the left—and saw at a glance that the outlaw had given him the best light. DeBar was facing him when he reached his ground.

"Are you ready?" he shouted.

"Ready!" cried Philip.

DeBar ran forward, shoulders hunched low, his pistol arm half extended, and Philip advanced to meet him. At seventy paces, without stopping in his half trot, the outlaw fired, and his bullet passed in a hissing warning three feet over Philip's head. The latter had planned to hold his fire until he was sure of hitting the outlaw in the arm or shoulder, but a second shot from him, which seemed to Philip almost to nip him in the face, stopped him short, and at fifty paces he returned the fire.

DeBar ducked low and Philip thought that he was hit.

Then with a fierce yell he darted forward, firing as he came.

Again, and still a third time Philip fired, and as DeBar advanced, unhurt, after each shot, a cry of amazement rose to his lips. At forty paces he could nip a four-inch bull's-eye three times out of five, and here he missed a man! At thirty—held an unbeaten record—and at thirty, here in the broad open, he still missed his man!

He had felt the breath of DeBar's fourth shot, and now with one cartridge each the men advanced foot by foot, until DeBar stopped and deliberately aimed at twenty paces. Their pistols rang out in the one report, and, standing unhurt, a feeling of horror swept over Philip as he looked at the other. The outlaw's arms fell to his side. His empty pistol dropped to the snow, and for a moment he stood rigid, with his face half turned to the gloomy sky, while a low cry of grief burst from Philip's lips.

In that momentary posture of DeBar he saw, not the effect of a wound only, but the grim, terrible rigidity of death. He dropped his own weapon and ran forward, and in that instant DeBar leaped to meet him with the fierceness of a beast!

It was a terrible bit of play on DeBar's part, and for a moment took Philip off his guard. He stepped aside, and, with the cleverness of a trained boxer, he sent a straight cut to the outlaw's face as he closed in. But the blow lacked force, and he staggered back under the other's weight, boiling with rage at the advantage which DeBar had taken of him.

The outlaw's hands gripped at his throat and his fingers sank into his neck like cords of steel. With a choking gasp he clutched at DeBar's wrists, knowing that another minute—a half-minute of that death clutch would throttle him. He saw the triumph in DeBar's eyes, and with a last supreme effort drew back his arm and sent a terrific short-arm punch into the other's stomach.

The grip at his throat relaxed. A second, a third, and a fourth blow, his arm traveling swiftly in and out, like a piston-rod, and the triumph in DeBar's eyes was replaced by a look of agony. The fingers at his throat loosened still more, and with a sudden movement Philip freed himself and sprang back a step to gather force for the final blow.

The move was fatal. Behind him his heel caught in a snow-smothered log and he pitched backward with DeBar on top of him.

Again the iron fingers burned at his throat. But this time he made no resistance, and after a moment the outlaw rose to his feet and stared down into the white, still face half buried in the snow. Then he gently lifted Philip's head in his arms. There was a crimson blotch in the snow and close to it the black edge of a hidden rock on which his head had struck.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The fact that beauty is only skin deep shouldn't influence a woman to be shallow.

If lions knew what many lion-tamers' wives know, there'd be less lion-tamers.